6. SKETCH OF MAJANG SYNTAX

Pete Unseth

1. Introduction

Majang is a Surma language, spoken by 15-30,000 people in southwestern Ethiopia.[1] There are only two published linguistic descripions by previous authors, one by Cerulli (1948) and the other by Bender (1983a), the latter being far more detailed and reliable. Both of these dealt with phonology and morphonolgy, and to a certain extent lexicon. I am in general agreement with Bender, so I will build on his work, presenting some of the main points of syntax, with additional points of morphology where relevant. Since the focus of this book is comparison and historical reconstruction, some comparative comments will be made to show parallels or innovations between Majang and other Surma languages. This article will follow Fleming's classification of Surma languages (1983a).

By way of general overview, Majang modifiers follow their heads, there is no marking of gender in affixes, modifiers agree in number with nouns, noun phrases are marked by suffixes, and word order is VSO. Typologically, Majang is anomalous. Majang has several VO characteristics, such as nouns followed by genitives, modifiers, and relative clauses, but it also has several OV characteristics, such as postpositions, question words that are sentence-final, and suffixes predominating over prefixes.

What makes these typological anomalies even more interesting is that at least two other Surma languages share this same combination of traits. Murle is also VSO, with genitives, modifiers, and relative clauses following nouns. It also has OV features, such as postpositions, sentence-final question words, and a preponderance of suffixes over prefixes. Didinga, closely related to Murle, is also VSO with genitives, adjectives, and relatives following their nouns. Didinga also shares the OV features of postpostions, sentence-final question words, and a majority of suffixes rather than prefixes. This suggests that Proto-Surma itself possessed this unusual combination of traits, in opposition to current typological theories, which argue against such constructions.[2] (In this connection, see Hock 1986: 617-626, who cautions against uncritical acceptance of a uniformity criterion in linguistic reconstruction).

2. Noun phrases

2.1.1 Nouns

Logically, the head of most noun phrases is a noun. Nouns are marked for number in at least one of three ways: singulative suffix, plural suffix, suppletive stem for plural. (See Unseth 1986a for a more detailed discussion of number marking on nouns.)

	gloss	singular	plural
Singulative:	ear	wiina	wiin
	louse	ŋɛtin	ŋɛti
Plural:	bee hive	ɗane	ɗanek
	ax	kabi	kabie
Both of the above:	egg	tutukan	tutukak
	road	gopan	gopak
Suppletive stem:	cow	taŋ	togi
	woman	ŋaai	ŋon

2.1.2 Derived nouns

Majang derives some nouns from verbs, as first pointed out by Bender (1983a: 120). I found this derivation to be apparently more productive than he did. One common class of derived nouns is agents. The other class is products, though it may be better to refer to the animates of this class as patients, such as the hunted creature as opposed to the hunter.

Both derived agents and products consistently form plurals with -ak. This is parallel to the Murle plural suffix for derived nouns, -ok (Arensen 1982: 87).

2.1.2.1 Derived agent nouns

Majang derives agent nouns from verbs by the addition of suffixes. Bender noted the use of the suffix -tan for this, pointing out that it is also used to mean "product or manner" (1983a: 120). My data shows that this suffix (actually two suffixes), is generally used for products and patients. To derive agents, my informants used the suffix -kan, divisible as k+an.

gloss	root	derived form
killer	ɓokot-	ɓokotkan
troublemaker	ʔoɗ-	ʔoɗukan
hunter	ɗowar-	dowarkan
deceiver	raam-	raamkan
sorcerer	tamal-	tamalkan
follower	noom-	noomkan
insulter	ɲon-	ɲonkan
teacher	jambul-	jambulkan

There is another agent suffix, -Vn, found in only a few examples. One example is jambulon 'teacher' from jambul 'teach',

(jambulkan is also possible, as seen above). From the verb 'hunt', the derived agent can be either dowarin or dowartan. Another example is agalin, derived from the verb agal- 'steal'. (There is also an alternative form for 'thief' agald.) Two other agent forms with Vn are found, both derived from nouns: odoun 'leader' from odo 'head' and gopanin 'traveller', derived from the noun gopan 'road'.

All of these examples share a suffix pattern -Vn to mark agent. This is comparable to the agent suffix -(i)ne that is found in Me'en (Ricci 1972: 121) and the derived nominal suffix -in in Murle (Arensen 1982: 86). This indicates a Proto-Surma derived nominal suffix *-Vn.

There is also some dialect variation in agent suffixes. At Sibo, on the northern edge of the Majang homeland, there is a tendency to use the suffix -Vn with unpredictable -V-.

gloss	verb stem	Sibo form	Tepi form
sing	iili-	iilian	iilikan
dance	ibaal-	ibaalin	ibaalkan
guard	koor-	kooran	koortan

In summary then, Majang has two agent suffixes, -Vn and -k+an, both of which appear traceable to a morpheme *-Vn.

2.1.2.2 Patient or product nouns

To mark products or the derived role of patient, the suffix is t+an, as pointed out by Bender (1983a: 120).

gloss	root	derived form
killed one	bokot-	bokottan
troubled one	?od-	?dutan
hunted one	dowar-	dowartan
deceived one	raam-	raamtan
bewitched one	tamal-	tamaltan
followed one	noom-	noontam
insulted one	non-	nontan
taught one	jambul-	jambultan

2.1.3 Nominal modifiers

Modifiers follow the head of a noun phrase, agreeing in number with the head. There is no gender marking.

2.1.3.1 Adjectives

Adjectival constructions are usually expressed as intransitive verbs, as noted by Bender (1983a: 143). For simple copular adjectival expressions, the root is inflected as a verb. The following paradigm uses the verb 'good' mintan, conjugated in the present tense, "I am good, you are good, etc." (The /i/ of 'good' is pronounced lax as ɪ).

	singular	plural
1st	mintan+k+aa+ŋ	mintan+k+ii+ŋ
2nd	mintan+k+in+ŋ	mintaana+k+arinŋ
3rd	mintan+ŋ	mintaana+ŋ

A brief discussion of the morphology is in order. The person and number morphemes are the usual morphemes for inflecting verbs. A morpheme -k- is added in first and second person. A marker k is commonly found in other Surma languages, for 1st person: Murle (Arensen 1982: 60), Didinga (Odden 1983: 157), Mursi (Turton and Bender 1976: 549, 550), Me'en (Will, p.c.). and Boya (De Jong, p.c.)). The final -ŋ is the intransitive marker. The second and third person plural forms, however, differ from the expected pattern, changing the verb stem slightly. The negative resumes the usual root: ku+ɛr mintan+ka 'they are not good' (see 3.6 below).

When adjectival roots are used to modify nominal heads, the result is a type of relative clause. Adjectival roots are verbal, suffixed with -ŋ, the intransitive (IV) marker, and -ɔŋk, which is also the marker for genitive case. This form is then preceded by co for singular, cigo for plural.

ɓal+aa+ko taŋ co koju+ŋ+ɔŋk
buy+1s+PST cow REL black+IV+GEN
'I bought a black cow'

[illegible]+aa+ko togi cigo koju+tu+ŋ+ɔŋk
buy+1s+PST cows REL black+PL+IV+GEN
'I bought black cows.'

For speakers of English, the morphology may be easier to understand if these sentences are read as "I bought a cow that is black", etc, The formation of plurals on such adjectival roots is not regular.

If an adjective is used with a demonstrative, the adjectival root has the shorter genitive ending, -(V)k.

dɛn+ɛ+ko ce koju+k
see+3s+PST DEM black+GEN
'He saw that black one.'

Adjectives as intransitive verbs in relative clauses resembling genitives are also found in other Surma languages. Concerning Didinga, De Jong wrote "attributive adjectives are a kind of relative clause," (p.c.). In Me'en, Will has found "the noun in relation to the adjective in the noun phrase behaves in exactly the same way as the possessed noun does in the genitive construction...the same suffixes have to be added," (p.c.). In Murle also, adjectival constructions are similar to genitives and relative clauses and "there are very few true adjectives in the Murle language. Most words which serve as adjectives are actually verbs," (Arensen 1982: 53, 88). Will (1986) shows some comparisons of

ɗam+e+ko ɗama — Passive
eat+PSV+PST food
'Food was eaten.'

ɓaldi+ko bokaye mooi tolay+a — Bi-transitive
sell+PST Bokaye salt Tolay+OBL
'Bokaye sold salt to Tolay.

ɓokotu idit ɗɛpey bey+e — Transitive with instrument
kill man lion spear+LOC
'A man killed a lion with a spear.'

3.1 Alternative Word Order

Deliberate attempts to elicit other word orders by topicalization did not produce any variants. Some SVO clauses were occasionally elicited at other times, such as in subordinate clauses, but there was no other discernible pattern in these few exceptions, except when I tried to elicit gapping (see sec. 3.5.1). My Majang helper consistenty rejected the SOV examples in Bender's article (Bender 1983a: 128, 129).

The order VSO is also standard in Murle (Arensen 1982: 52), Didinga (Odden 1983: 170), and Boya (Narim, DeJong, p.c.) of Southern Surma. Elsewhere, I have argued that Proto-Surma was VSO (Unseth 1986c).

3.2 Copula and Existence

3.2.1 Copular Constructions

I find no overtly copular verb. Copular constructions are of two types. The first type occurs equationally with noun complements. If the complement of the copula is a noun, the independent subject pronoun (with or without a subject NP) precedes the noun. To show time, the same tense morphemes as for verbs are used, following the pronoun. An educated Majang speaker was quite firm that the pronoun and the time morpheme combine to form a single word. The following paradigm illustrates the sentence 'X is a teacher.'

	sg.	pl.
1.	eeti jambulkan	ɛtiŋk jambulkanak
2.	iini jambulkan	iinak jambulkanak
3.	egeecɛ ɔki jambulkan	ɛgeeceek jambulkanak

With a subject NP, the pronominal form remains: ɛgɛ ɔaaki jambultan 'Daaki is a student.'

Tense morphemes are illustrated below:

eeti jambulkan 'I am a teacher.'

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